

The Notion of God as Father in the New Testament  
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The importance of invoking God as Father is clearly manifested in the references that we have in Galatians 4.6 "And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"; Romans 8.15-16 "For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God"; 1 Peter 1.17 "If you invoke as Father the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds, live in reverent fear during the time of your exile." and in the use of the Lord's Prayer. The cry "Abba" is not just a liturgical title; it is the result of the Spirit of adoption working within the believer.

In the letter to the Ephesians, chapter 3, verses 14 - 19, we encounter these powerful, consoling words: "For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God."

After listening to these words from the letter to the Ephesians, one can understand better the words that our holy mother Teresa wrote in the "Way of Perfection":

"But since, as I say, I'm dealing with vocal prayer, it may seem to anyone who doesn't know about the matter that vocal prayer doesn't go with contemplation; but I know that it does. Pardon me, but I want to say this: I know there are many persons who while praying vocally, as already has been mentioned, are raised by God to sublime contemplation [without their striving for anything or understanding how. It's because of this that I insist so much, daughters, upon your reciting vocal prayer well.] I know a person who was never able to pray any way but vocally, and though she was tied to this form of prayer she experienced everything else. And if she didn't recite vocal prayer her mind wandered so much that she couldn't bear it. Would that our mental prayer were as good! She spent several hours reciting a certain number of Our Fathers, in memory of the times our Lord shed His blood, as well as a few other vocal prayers. Once she came to me very afflicted because she didn't know how to practice mental prayer nor could she contemplate; she could only pray vocally. I asked her how she was praying, and I saw that though she was tied to the Our Father she experienced pure contemplation and that the Lord was raising her up and joining her with Himself in union. And from her deeds it seemed truly that she was receiving such great favours, for she was living a very good life. So I praised the Lord and envied her for her vocal prayer." (ICS. Way of Perfection, ch 30.par.7)

To embrace the notion of God as Father is to enter into a very special relationship and union with God. The more we become conscious of this relationship, the more we become detached from human beings and material things. Paul's words to the Corinthians resound with the same power today as they did nearly 2000 years ago: "What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God: as God said, "I will live in them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore come out from them, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch nothing unclean; then I will welcome you, and I will be your father, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty." Since we

have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and of spirit, making holiness perfect in the fear of God." (2 Cor 6.16 - 7.1)

The notion of God as the Father was very much present in the mind of the apostle Paul. Just a quick look at the greetings in his letters to the Christian Churches and to others will reveal this truth. Here are some of the references: Rom 1.7; 1 Cor 1.3; 2 Cor 1.2; Gal 1.3; Eph 1.2-3; Phil 1.2; Col 1.2-3; 1 Thess 1.1-3; 2 Thess 1.1-2; 1 Tim 1.2; 2 Tim 1.2 (note the beauty and value of these words: "Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.") Titus 1.4; Phl 3. The other Christian letters in the New Testament are also a concrete proof of the consciousness of the reality that God is our Father. In 1 John 1.3; 2 Jn 3-4; Jude 1-2; we encounter statements that continue to prove how much God was viewed as the Father in the New Testament times.

A classical text from 1 Peter is another proof of this truth: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith - being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire - may be found to result in praise and glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls." (1 Pet 1.3-9)

The Synoptic Gospels (Mark, Matthew, and Luke) have preserved for us the idea that our heavenly Father is a model of impartial generosity who also makes known his perfection in forgiveness. In the Synoptics we are presented with the reality that God as a Father combines and balances love with discipline. He also provides for our earthly needs and final salvation (Mk 11.25; Mt 6.14-15; Lk 11.2-13; 12.32; 15.11ff). A general view of the Synoptics projects in front of us the work of Christ whereby the Father unites the righteous and the unrighteous in a new family fellowship by overcoming the legalism of the former and graciously opening the doors to the latter. This work came to completion on the Cross, where Jesus forgives the thief and prays for the self-righteous. It is on the Cross that Jesus fulfils the truth of fatherhood that dominates his mission.

The Synoptic picture of God as Father cannot be complete if we do not make mention of the Father in prayer. Both Matthew and Luke record for us the "Our Father" - though Luke's version leaves out the "Our" (Luke 11.2f). The Matthean version of the Lord's Prayer consists of an address to God as "Our Father" (Mt 6.9b); three "you" petitions (Mt 6.9c-10), and three "we" petitions (Mt 6.11-13). Note that the central petition is "May your kingdom come" (Mt 6.10a). There exist many similarities between the "Lord's Prayer" and the Jewish prayer so-called the 'Amidah (stand Up-Eighteen Benedictions, recited three times a day. Note that the Didache states that Christians were to pray the Lord's Prayer three times a day!)

It can rightly be said that the Gospel of John is the Gospel of the Father (more than 110 times God is referred to as "Father"). The concluding sentence of the prologue of John's Gospel: "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known." (Jn 1.18) is an interesting statement that continues to unfold throughout the whole Gospel. The Fourth Gospel presents the God of Israel as Father, and Jesus as Son, in an all-determining relationship. The oneness of will and love that exists between Jesus and the

Father is also reflected where we encounter an interplay between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Paraclete will be the presence of Jesus in his absence; leading, instructing, comforting believers, and also judging the world (Jn 14.15-17; 14.25-26; 15.26-27; 16.7-15). The gift of the Paraclete is sent by both the Father and the departed Jesus.

Some biblical scholars see a similarity between the "Lord's Prayer" in Matthew and Luke, and chapter 17 of John's Gospel. The terminology and petitions in both instances are very much the same.

The words of Jesus in John 14.23-24 are worth quoting here: "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me."

Jesus in John's Gospel urges us to pray to the Father and to do so in His name: "Very truly I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive so that your joy may be complete." (Jn 16.23-24) Obedience to the word of God - the commandments, brings forth the indwelling of the Father in us, which as a result, generates complete joy: "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." (Jn 15.9-11).

In order to complete this short reflection on God as Father in the New Testament, let us have a quick look at the Book of Revelation. In the Prologue of John's Gospel we are told that those who believed in Jesus were given power "to become children of God" (Jn 1.12b). In the Book of Revelation, these believers are standing on Mount Zion and on their foreheads is written "the name of the Lamb and the name of the Father" (Rev 14.1b). What is interesting about this reference is the fact that this is the last reference of God as Father in the New Testament (the last in the Book of Revelation). Is this another way of saying that God as Father is made manifest every time that we, believers, behave as his children? Do others read on our foreheads the name of the Lamb and the name of the Father? Are we conscious of our call to be sisters and brothers?

Perhaps it is about time, that as we stand at the threshold of the millennium, we reflect seriously on the words of the letter to the Ephesians: "I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all." (Eph 4.1-6)